

Assessing effectiveness of public affairs:

An explorative research to the methods for assessing effectiveness of public affairs by regional governments in the Dutch political arena

by

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How the effectiveness of public affairs activities of regional governments can be evaluated

A masterthesis from the perspective of public administration to the assessment of effectiveness of public affairs by regional governments in the Dutch national political arena.

Colofon

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Summary

This research aims to find the best methodology for assessing the effectiveness of public affairs within the context of Dutch regional governments practicing public affairs in the national arena. Public affairs is the practice of influencing decision-makers to alter policy or political decisions. The popularity of public affairs has increased over the past few decades, among regional governments as well. Municipalities have chosen to work together regionally to exercise more influence. However, the extent to which their lobby activities influence political decisions in the national political arena is unknown. The scientific literature on public affairs is scarce and researching the concept of effectiveness has proven to be complex, making it an interesting research topic. The concept of influence is too abstract to prove a causal relationship between the conducted activities by an organization and the exerted influence on the policymaker. There have been attempts at measuring the effectiveness of public affairs in the literature, yet most are limited to the contexts of the European Union and the United States, and use corporate interest groups as units of analysis. Taking a national arena as context and public institutions as units of analysis creates a different context, affecting the applicability of certain methods.

Although the literature on assessing the effectiveness of public affairs is scarce, there are three methods described on how the effectiveness of public affairs can be assessed. These three methods are the process-tracing method, the attributed influence method, and the preference attainment method. This research will investigate to what extent these three methods are fit to be used for evaluating the effectiveness of public affairs activities in the context of Dutch regional governments. The main research question for this research is formulated as: *“To what extent are the process-tracing, attributed influence, and preference attainment methods applicable to measure the effectiveness within the context of Dutch regional governments?”*.

To address the main research question, desk research has been conducted using lobby documents from regional governments in the Netherlands. Next to that, interviews have been conducted with public affairs professionals from Dutch regional governments. The data collection resulted in a description of the practice of public affairs by Dutch regional governments. To research if the aforementioned methods for assessing effectiveness could be applied to the Dutch system, the characteristics that these methods use in their application have been selected. Subsequently, a comparison has been made between the theory and the practice of public affairs to investigate the extent to which the aforementioned characteristics are present in the Dutch practice of public affairs. The conclusion to this research describes for each of the methods to what extent they are fit to be applied to the Dutch system.

It can be concluded from the comparison between the theory and the practice that the three methods central in this research, process-tracing, attributed influence, and preference attainment, are to varying degrees fit to apply to the Dutch practice of public affairs. The practice of public affairs by Dutch regional governments shows many similarities to the theory of public affairs. The results show that there are no obstacles to using the attributed influence method in the context of Dutch regional governments. The process-tracing and preference attainment methods can be considered less fit for assessing the effectiveness in the context of Dutch regional governments. The lack of documentation and transparency of public affairs processes makes the process-tracing method difficult to apply. The preference attainment method is difficult to apply because of the inability to quantify starting points, outcomes, and goals of most public affairs processes of Dutch regional governments.

This research has an explorative character. Given that there is no clear framework in place for assessing the effectiveness of public affairs in the context of Dutch regional governments, this research is new to this field. The data generated in conducting this research aims to add new insights to the academic discussion. Finally, even though this research stands on its own, follow-up research is encouraged.

1. Introduction

This chapter puts the scope of the research into perspective. The first paragraph introduces the thesis topic, the second paragraph builds on this topic and presents the research questions, and finally, the third paragraph explains the relevance of the topic to the scientific discipline and society.

1.1 Public affairs by regions

Public affairs is a controversial topic, as it can be perceived as backdoor politics and those with money would have the most influence in politics (Davidson, 2014). Yet public affairs is practiced by many companies, NGO's and even governments on various levels. Municipalities unite and cooperate, resulting in regional administrations that practice public affairs. Municipalities working together on public affairs is a trend in the Dutch and European political arenas (Figuee, Gosselt, Linders, & De Jong, 2016). They do so because regional administrations in the political arena represent a larger population and have more (financial) resources for their lobby. Therefore, they are presumed to be more effective in public affairs than municipalities that do not cooperate.

The goal of this research is to study with what method the effectiveness of Dutch regional governments' public affairs activities can be assessed. Assessing effectiveness is an abstract concept in public affairs, as being effective in public affairs generally means that there is a *degree of influence* over policy (McGrath, 2006). So the policy is to be influenced or at least affected as a result of the activities by the public affairs professional. Many aspects of public affairs have been researched. For example, the internal organization (Figuee et al., 2016), competencies of public affairs professionals (McGrath, 2006; Figuee, 2017), or public affairs as it is practiced (McGrath, Moss, & Harris, 2010; Timmermans, Coops, Van Keep, De Lange, & Van Venetië, 2019). However, the topic of effectiveness has been avoided by many scholars in the field of public affairs, because of the difficulty of operationalizing the concept of influence (Mahoney, 2007).

1.2 Research questions

This research proposes an approach to guide further research in assessing the effectiveness of public affairs activities by public actors in a national context. The objective of this study is to address the following research question: *"To what extent are the process-tracing, attributed influence, and preference attainment methods applicable to measure the effectiveness within the context of Dutch regional governments?"*. Process tracing, attributed influence, and preference attainment are the three methods in the literature that aim to research the effectiveness of public affairs (Hofman & Aalbers, 2017). However, the theoretical base for applying the methods to research on assessing the effectiveness of public affairs is limited.

To address the main research question, two sub-questions have been formulated. The context in which public affairs is practiced can be described as a crucial determinant (Binderkrantz & Rasmussen, 2015) and researchers should be cautious generalizing research on influence measurement from the European and American context to national contexts (Beyers, Eising, & Maloney, 2008). The first sub-question addresses the three methods that assess the effectiveness of public affairs. It is formulated as follows: *"What public affairs characteristics are conditional to applying the process-tracing, attributed influence, and preference attainment methods to a national context?"*. The theoretical framework describes the three methods by describing the theory on the methods, the pros and cons of the methods, and experiences on the usage of the methods. The next paragraph will discuss the relevance of this research to the scientific discipline and society.

The second sub-question analyses the context: *"What characterizes public affairs processes of Dutch regional governments?"*. To address the second sub-question, the theoretical framework describes

the theoretical process of public affairs. Subsequently, data is collected on public affairs processes of Dutch regional governments. A comparison is made between the theoretical practice of public affairs and the practice by Dutch regional governments.

To address the main research question, the applicability of the three methods for assessing effectiveness is determined. To do so, the research investigates the extent to which the input for the methods is present in the context of Dutch regional governments. The input is the characteristics that the methods use to assess the effectiveness of public affairs. These input characteristics are different for each of the methods. The input characteristics are named in the theoretical framework.

The context of Dutch regional governments is explained using a structure of 'the public affairs process'. In the theoretical chapter, the public affairs process is explained as to how it is described in the literature. Using the results from the data collection, the public affairs practice of Dutch regional governments is described using the same structure. To determine the extent to which the input characteristics are present in the context, it is investigated to what extent they are present in the process of public affairs as practiced by Dutch regional governments.

1.3 Relevance of this research

This research aims to contribute to the scientific literature on public affairs. The theoretical base of assessing the effectiveness of public affairs is limited to a few methods (see Verschuren & Arts, 2004; Dür, 2008b; Hofman & Aalbers, 2017). The previous research is very general and has been mostly applied to transnational contexts (e.g. the EU, the US)¹, with clear interest groups or businesses as actors in mind. Most of the existing literature is aimed at public affairs as it is practiced by corporate interest groups while practicing public affairs as a public actor creates a different context (Loftis & Kettler, 2015). So this research is unique because it focuses on methods for assessing the effectiveness of public affairs in the Dutch context and the context of regional governments. Besides the scientific relevance, the research also holds societal relevancy. Mahoney (2007) argues that considering the natural aim of public affairs to influence policy or political decisions, it is logical that the extent to which this goal is achieved should be studied. Measuring influence is necessary because political decision-makers *should* be responsive to citizens and research into the power over political decisions helps society in understanding which actors have the power over political decisions in reality (Rasmussen, Mäder, & Reher, 2018).

This research has an explorative character. Given that this specific context of regional governments practicing public affairs in a national arena has not been researched before in the literature of influence measurement, this research is new to this field. The data that is generated throughout the conducting of this research is unique to the field and adds new research insights. This research stands on its own but offers the possibility for follow-up research to build on it.

¹ Some notable exceptions on the research to interest group influence in national contexts are for example the research by Romeijn (2021) and a study about public affairs strategies in the Dutch subnational context by Figee, Gosselt, and De Jong (2019).

2. Theory

This chapter describes the theoretical framework of the research. It provides a short literature review of the discipline of public affairs. Secondly, it explains what effective public affairs means and what causes public affairs to become effective. The third paragraph describes the different approaches to assessing the effectiveness of public affairs and how they could be used in the context of Dutch regional governments.

2.1 Public affairs

2.1.1 Definition of public affairs

Public affairs as a discipline is closely related to communications, public relations, and issues management (McGrath et al., 2010). In society, the more widely known term “lobbying” is commonly used to refer to the same practice. The difference between these (sometimes exchangeable) terms, is that lobbying is only a part of a public affairs process. Public affairs can be defined as “the strategic process of influencing political decision-making, responding to societal and political developments, and shaping public opinion, in favour of the organization” (Beroepsvereniging voor Public affairs [BVPA], 2007). In this thesis, the definition of the BVPA (Dutch professional organization for public affairs) is used to describe public affairs, but the emphasis is laid on the influencing of political decision-making.

It should also be noted that public affairs aims to influence political decisions or policy (Mahoney, 2007; Klüver, The contextual nature of lobbying: Explaining lobbying success in the European Union, 2011). From an evaluation perspective, effectiveness can be defined as a change in the variables as a consequence of an intervention (Swanborn, 2007). Applying that to public affairs, it can be stated that public affairs is effective when it changes political outcomes to be more or fully aligned with the preferences of the interest group (Dür, 2008b). Therefore, the terms “influence” and “effectiveness” can be used synonymous in the context of public affairs, considering the natural goal of public affairs to be influential (Van Schendelen, 2005, p. 210; Mahoney, 2007).

Besides lobbying, public affairs processes often consist of activities related to issue management and stakeholder engagement (Timmermans et al., 2019). Figuee (2017) sums up the main activities or instruments within public affairs as lobbying, issue management, network management, and reputation management. Besides these main activities, there are various activities that a public affairs professional could conduct to reach their goal. Research in Asia among public affairs practitioners lists a total of 21 activities that fall under the broad umbrella of public affairs (Centre for Corporate Public Affairs as cited in McGrath et al., 2010). So the discipline is broad, but there is no consensus among scholars about the exact activities that make public affairs.

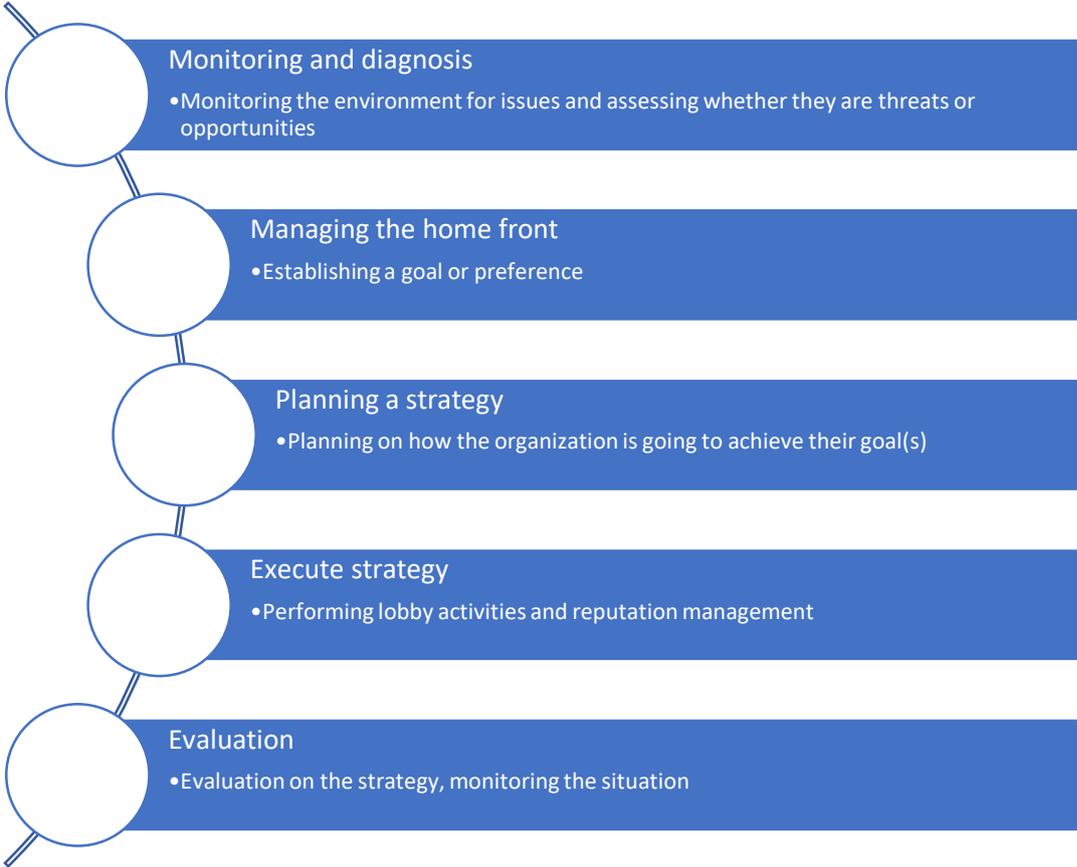
2.1.2 The public affairs process

To describe the public affairs process, this thesis uses the cycle of issue management. There are multiple conceptualisations on the issue life cycle (see e.g. Tian & Fan, 2008; McGrath et al., 2010). To describe the cycle of issue management here, the work by Timmermans et al. (2019) is used as a basis. The cycle of issue management by Timmermans et al. (2019) describes the public affairs cycle from the perspective of an organization practicing public affairs. Additionally, the thesis uses descriptions of the public affairs process by Van Schendelen (2005) and McGrath et al. (2010). This results in a cycle of issue management that describes how an issue evolves in five stages from a non-issue to the measures that address the issue.

The public affairs process of an organization starts internally. Organizations monitor the environment for issues and assess whether upcoming issues are threats or opportunities for them (Timmermans et

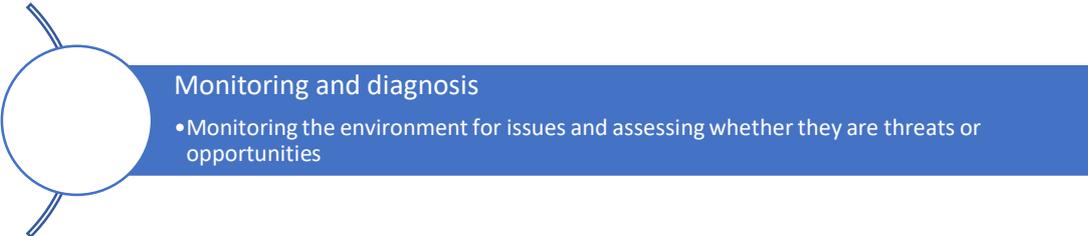
al., 2019). Subsequently, if an issue is relevant to the organization, it sets a goal for that issue. In the third stage, the organization plans a public affairs strategy to achieve its goal. The fourth stage is about executing that strategy. Finally, when the decision-maker takes measures to tackle the issue, the organization practicing public affairs can evaluate its strategy and continue monitoring an issue for any developments. Figure 1 describes the five stages.

Figure 1: Five stages of the public affairs process (own figure)



2.1.3 Monitoring and diagnosis

Organizations practice issue management to monitor and diagnose issues. Issue management can be defined as systematically recognizing and acting upon issues (Timmermans et al., 2019, p. 248). In turn, an issue can be defined as a subject to which an organization or group wishes to exert influence for the benefit of its social position, its internal operations, or its interests in the policy process (Timmermans et al., 2019, p. 232). Monitoring the public arena for issues is the first step in public affairs.



Organizations could also attempt to put an issue on the public agenda themselves. If an organization attempts to set an issue on the public agenda, it needs to choose which channels to use in its public affairs strategy. Van Schendelen (2005) explains that when an organization attempts to put an issue on the agenda themselves, it is crucial to use the right channel for the issue, as well as having the right timing and location for it. Before an organization puts an issue on the agenda or acts upon an issue that is already on the agenda, it needs to manage its home front.

2.1.4 Managing the home front

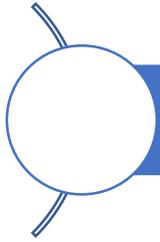
Before an organization acts upon an issue, it needs to decide on its goal or preference (Van Schendelen, 2005; Timmermans et al., 2019). The goals of public affairs can generally be divided into two categories: organizations can aim to exert influence by setting the public agenda or by affecting political decisions (Binderkrantz & Pedersen, 2019). Setting the public agenda means drawing attention to an issue and shaping the contours of the public debate (Binderkrantz & Pedersen, 2019). The other type of objective is affecting political decisions. This type of objective refers to affecting the outcome of the policy process of matters that are already subject to debate.



The organization of public affairs at regional governments starts with a collective agenda, supported by competent professionals. The public affairs activities should be supported and carried out by more people than just the public affairs professional and need to show continuity (Figuee et al., 2016). For public affairs to work well, the function requires to be accepted and embedded in the organization on all its levels, not just internally but also by the municipalities that it represents. Managing the home front is more time-intensive when there is disagreement in the organization about the goals.

2.1.5 Planning a strategy

When an issue is set on the public agenda, the decision-maker needs to decide how to tackle the problem (note that this does not imply that specific actions always take place; *laissez-faire* is also a strategy). Organizations would need to assess the risks and opportunities of an issue to create a strategy on how to respond if the issue is deemed relevant to them (Timmermans et al., 2019). The strategic choices are focused on the extent to which the organization is going to be involved in the issue and how much they *can* be involved. Mahon (2017) names several strategies that an organization could carry out, for example by defusing the issue, staying silent, taking responsibility, or rejecting responsibility. One of the most fruitful strategies for responding to issues is by framing the issue (McGrath et al., 2010). Framing refers to the process in which an interest group selects parts of a perceived reality and makes them more salient in the communicated message, in a way that promotes their definition of the problem or adds their solution into it (De Vreese, 2005). By framing the issue differently than other actors, decision-makers and the public could be convinced to perceive the issue differently to the advantage of the interest group.



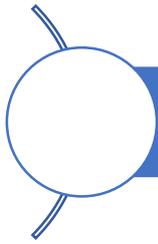
Planning a strategy

- Planning on how the organization is going to achieve their goal(s)

Besides the direct strategy on the issue, the organization needs to interact with stakeholders. In this stage, the opponents and supporters are identified and it is planned how the organization deals with stakeholders. Choosing the type of stakeholders to approach, creating and maintaining networks, and forming coalitions falls under stakeholder management (Van Schendelen, 2005). Additionally, Van Schendelen (2010) notes the choosing of the public affairs strategy, so whether to “attack” an opposing actor or whether to “defend” their organization as a response to an issue, as part of stakeholder management. An example of using stakeholder management in public affairs is when a regional government forms a coalition with various firms to lobby for a new airport. Firms in that hypothetical coalition could be an aviation company and an interest group that represents regional economic interests. One tool in particular within stakeholder management, the stakeholder analysis or stakeholder matrix, is commonly used to gain an overview of stakeholders and their interests (Timmermans et al., 2019). In the next stage, the strategy on how to respond to the issue and the stakeholders is executed and the lobbying takes place. While the strategy is carried out, activities are also aimed at improving the reputation of the organization (Timmermans et al. 2019).

2.1.6 Executing the strategy

Lobbying can be considered the most visible activity of public affairs. To elaborate on the term, a distinction has to be made. A common distinction in types of lobbying is the direct/indirect distinction, which is also known as inside lobbying and outside lobbying (Baumgartner, Berry, Hojnacki, Kimball, & Leech, 2009). Direct lobbying is practiced toward the decision-maker. A traditional way of doing so is when the public affairs professional makes clear whom they represent and what they desire, laid down in a semi-formal text called a position paper or White Paper (Van Schendelen, 2005). Direct lobbying also includes activities such as meeting with decision-makers, “wining and dining” and making deals, but that is only a small part at the end of the whole public affairs process (Figuee, 2017). Public affairs professionals could also practice indirect lobbying, which is aimed at influencing public opinion and using public opinion to influence political decision-making (Dür, Bernhagen, & Marshall, 2015). A common instrument in indirect lobbying is the usage of social media to voice one’s opinion about an issue to affect the public agenda (Hoffmann & Lutz, 2015). Besides these two types of lobbying, Dür (2008b) considers two more types to the distinction. An interest group could influence the selection of decision-makers. By influencing who gets to make the decision, an organization could influence the decisions (Dür, 2008b). Finally, interest groups could also wield structural power or “have a seat at the table”, which means to acquire formal power themselves in the decision-making process (Dür, 2008b). It should be noted that to achieve public affairs goals, lobbying does not necessarily have to take place. Working on issue management, stakeholder management, or reputation management could also lead to achieving the public affairs goals.



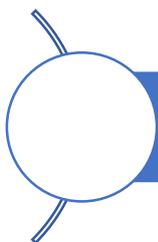
Executing strategy

- Performing lobby activities and reputation management

The reputation of an organization refers to the perceptions of stakeholders towards that organization, which influences choices made by stakeholders and the performance of the organization (Rindova, Williamson, Petkova, & Sever, 2005). In reputation management, the message that the organization gives off should be in line with its behaviour, communication, and symbolism (Fiege, 2017). This makes proper reputation management necessary to gain and maintain a good position in the political arena. An example of using reputation management is to compare the identity of the organization (“what do we think we are”) with the image of the organization (“what do they think we are”). This experiment should give the organization an idea of the image that it should project to its stakeholders. Reputation management is not only relevant to corporate actors but also governmental actors, like regional governments.

2.1.7 Evaluation

In the final stage of an issue, the implementation of the governmental measures takes place with its consequences (McGrath et al., 2010). When the implementation of governmental measures takes place, it is often too late to practice public affairs to steer the outcome, as the decision-maker generally already has an agreement on the measures. Practicing public affairs in the implementation stage is still possible, but public affairs is considered more effective when it can influence how the issue is perceived by the public and how it reaches the political agenda (McGrath et al., 2010). Timmermans et al. (2019) explain that public attention to the issue declines if the governmental measures have been effective, thus resulting in less relevancy to the issue. Organizations should monitor the issue to follow any developments in case the issue returns. If the issue does return, the cycle starts over.



Evaluation

- Evaluation on the strategy, monitoring the situation

In this stage, an evaluation of the organizations’ strategy can be conducted and the strategy’s effectiveness can be assessed. Evaluating public affairs activities is not popular among organizations. Opponents argue that public affairs processes are too complex and that there is no clear connection between cause and consequence in this field (Timmermans et al., 2019). The success of public affairs could also not be appointed to one or several activities. Even though an evaluation is considered a useful activity at the end of the public affairs process, public affairs professionals often skip it and continue to monitor the situation (Timmermans et al., 2019).

2.2 Measurement of the effectiveness of public affairs

2.2.1 Context matters

The context of regional governments in the Netherlands has specific factors that make it an interesting environment. Regional profiling and thematic collaboration are factors in public affairs

that are specific for regional governments (Figuee, Gosselt, & De Jong, 2019). Regional profiling is done by focussing on the factors that make a region unique, often referring to historical and sociocultural factors. Thematic collaboration refers to the activity of working together as a region with other, like-minded, regions both within the national borders and outside them (Figuee et al., 2019). Another factor that is interesting for this context, specifically for governments, is the factor of having citizens as an important stakeholder. This is an interesting factor because the interests of the citizens can be diffuse and their interests can be subject of debate (Figuee et al., 2019). These factors combined, make that the context of Dutch regional governments is an entirely different context than a European or American context.

Policy processes in the United States can be characterized by the “winner takes all” outcomes (Mahoney, 2007). There is one winner that attains their goals and all other lobbying parties do not attain their goals. In contrast to the US, the policy of the EU is often a compromise of various parties (Mahoney, 2007). This means for assessing the effectiveness of public affairs, that multiple lobbying parties have varying degrees of influence over the results. There is more nuance to the results and appointing the influence that each party has over a policy result is more complex. The Dutch national arena is similar to the European arena on this matter, as policy outcomes are almost always a result of compromises.

Issues in the European arena are less salient to the general public than issues in the national arena (Rasmussen M. K., 2015). That means that types of lobbying that involve public pressure are less effective. Public affairs is practiced more behind closed doors and with less transparency in the European arena, compared to the national arena's. Some methods that assess the effectiveness of public affairs require openness about the activities (Dür, 2008b). Therefore, the salience of issues affects the methodology to assess the effectiveness of public affairs.

2.2.2 Factors for public affairs effectiveness

To understand how the effectiveness of public affairs can be assessed, it is helpful to understand what causes public affairs efforts to be effective. The effectiveness depends on a set of variables, which will be explained shortly. What makes a public affairs process and its activities effective is dependent on characteristics of the interest group, characteristics of the issue, and characteristics of the context (Mahoney, 2007). Mahoney (2007) refers to these different types as levels. For the institutional level, which refers to the context in which the activities take place, the effectiveness of public affairs is firstly dependent on the arena and the extent to which the arena is recipient to the lobby group. Secondly, the rules surrounding the policy processes in the arena are a determinant. The rules decide for example who can propose initiatives in the arena. If any member of parliament can propose new laws, then public affairs can be practiced on any member of parliament to initiate a new law, leading to many proposals. However, if only the ruling party can propose new laws in a country, then public affairs professionals will aim most of their activities on the ruling party only.

On an issue-specific level, three factors play a role (Mahoney, 2007). The first factor is the policy implications of the objective that the public affairs professional aims to achieve. Practicing public affairs to implement an intervention with far-reaching implications is likely to be less successful than aiming for a relatively simple policy adjustment. The second factor on this level is the presence of one or more countervailing groups. Success is more likely to be achieved when there is no (strong) countervailing group. The organization of focusing events is the third factor. In the case of focusing events where the public is mobilized for an issue, the outcome of the public affairs process is likely to change in favour of the side that mobilizes the public. Klüver (2011) adds to that the salience of an issue, which has a positive or negative effect depending on the context.

On the interest group level, Mahoney (2007) names a total of five factors that determine the effectiveness of public affairs. These factors are the financial resources of an organization, the membership size of the lobbying group, who the group represents, the position, tactics of the group, and any additional techniques. While Dür (2008a) also mentions that the financial resources of an organization further the success in public affairs, this is disputed. Both the financial resources and membership size factors are argued by Horváthová and Dobbins (2019) to be “not necessarily automatically predictors”. Their research shows that strong historical links between an interest group and the decision-maker could cause these factors to become unnecessary. In addition, the resources are argued by Binderkrantz and Rasmussen (2015) to be more of a factor at the EU level than at a national level. So the aforementioned factors vary in the extent to which they affect the effectiveness, depending on the context. It should be clear that there is no consensus in the literature on which factors are actual determinants for public affairs effectiveness and what factors are more important than others.

2.3 Approaches to assessing public affairs effectiveness

2.3.1 General notes on assessing the effectiveness

Assessing the effectiveness of public affairs has drawbacks. There are general problems that apply to each of the methods that aim to assess the effectiveness. In this paragraph, the five most prominent problems described in the literature are discussed. The first issue of assessing the effectiveness of public affairs is the issue of establishing causality (Verschuren & Arts, 2004; Dür, 2008b). Establishing a connection between public affairs activities and the exerted influence as a consequence of those activities implies a causal relation. Assessing causality is a common difficulty in social sciences (Verschuren & Arts, 2004; Beach & Pedersen, 2013). A policy outcome may be a result of the public affairs efforts of a regional government, but to what extent did specifically those efforts affect the outcome? It is often the case that other factors could have played a part in achieving the outcome as well and could there be a confounding variable or an effect modifying variable. The answer to that question is difficult to answer given the large number of possible factors that could play a role in the policy process.

A second problem prominent in the literature is that in public affairs different channels can be used for lobbying (Dür, 2008b). This problem has been discussed previously using the direct-indirection distinction of public affairs. Public affairs can be practiced using (social) media or meeting with policymakers, but also by influencing the selection of decision-makers. When a party uses multiple channels, the process becomes diffuse. A diffuse process makes it harder to assess how the influence is exerted and to establish a connection between cause and effect.

The third problem that arises in measuring effectiveness is the presence of counteractive lobbying in the public affairs process (Dür, 2008b). Opposing parties may exert influence over the decision-makers as well and steer a certain outcome in their direction. Decision-makers take multiple interests into account and could end up with a compromise that aims to fulfil multiple interests. This could result in a trade-off (Mahoney, 2007). A trade-off makes it difficult to assess the extent to which one parties' interest has been met and the extent to which other interests have been met. But even if the one parties' interest has not been reached, it does not mean that there has been no influence exerted on the policymaker (Mahoney, 2007).

A fourth problem is that there are multiple stages in the policy process in which the influence can be exerted (Dür, 2008b). Measuring the extent to which influence is exerted in one stage may give a skewed image of the total exerted influence, as influence may have been exerted in other stages of the process as well, affecting the outcome. Finally, Lowery (2013) explains the complex, reciprocal

relationship between a public affairs professional and a decision-maker that affects the influence, which is difficult to take into account using a measuring method.

The literature does not present a single perfect method for measuring effectiveness that overcomes all of the aforementioned issues (Fleisher, 2005; Mahoney, 2007; Dür, 2008b). The current literature describes three approaches to measure the effectiveness of public affairs, namely process-tracing, attributed influence method, and the preference attainment method. In the next paragraphs, each of the methods is discussed.

2.3.2 Process-tracing

Process-tracing is a case-study method that has a strong literary foundation in social sciences (Beach & Pedersen, 2013). It is argued to be the strongest method for explaining complex, causal processes (Khagram & Thomas, 2010; Collier, 2011). The input for the usage of this method on public affairs processes is both written documents and input from actors. These written documents could be policy papers or white papers that are used in the public affairs process. As the method aims to trace the actions that caused influence, it uses any information that could uncover the steps that lead to influence.

Collecting the necessary information is often done by conducting semi-structured interviews in addition to document research, allowing researchers to dig deeper into the activities that have been conducted in the process of public affairs (Dür, 2008b). Using process-tracing, scholars research the preferences of interest groups, their attempts at influencing, responses by other actors to these attempts, access to decision-makers, the degree to which preferences are met in the outcome, and (dis-)satisfaction of groups with the outcome (Dür, 2008b). These aspects of the process of public affairs lead to a conclusion about the degree to which one or more interest groups have been effective in their public affairs activities.

Process-tracing is a type of method that observes the entire process of public affairs as practiced by an organization on a single issue and draws conclusions from the actions and consequences that have taken place (Collier, 2011; Beach & Pedersen, 2013). An example of applying process-tracing is the study by Michalowitz (2007), who describes three case studies. To describe the three case studies, Michalowitz interviewed 45 public and private actors. For each case in the study, the degree of conflict, structural conditions, types of interest, and outcomes are described, concluding with the influence the actors had on the case. This method is thorough, as it extensively researches each case in search of nodes in the process where influence is exerted. A drawback of that quality is that usually small N-groups are used as the method takes a lot of time to conduct the research. This often leads to conclusions that are drawn over little data (Dür, 2008b).

In contrast to the other two methods (elaboration follows in the next paragraphs), the process-tracing method aims to research the actual effectiveness of public affairs processes. Though it must be noted that only the influence that is “visibly” exerted is taken into account. Actions that could not be observed or lack empirical evidence are difficult to take into account. The reputation of a certain actor could be influential on the decision-making process, even though the actor does not engage in public affairs activities on that process. An example is the presence of a trade union, which does not necessarily need to conduct any activities to make lawmakers take them into account when a new trade law is drafted. Another drawback to process-tracing is that some activities may not have any empirical evidence and cross-checking might lead to different opinions on the effects of the same activity (Dür, 2008b). So the substantiation as to how influence has been exerted might be an opinion or a personal experience of a professional and these claims on the activities by the professional could be (un)consciously misrepresented (Dür, 2008b).

Additionally, Dur (2008b) describes drawbacks of process-tracing as the lack of a yardstick as to what influential means and the fact that a small effort could have a meaningful impact on the outcome and a large effort could have very little effect. Different weightings could be given to activities and the establishment of a yardstick could overcome some of the drawbacks.

2.3.3 Attributed influence

In using the attributed influence method, a group of actors is questioned, often through a survey, about their assessment of the influence they exerted and/or another group's influence (Dür, 2008b; Güell, 2011). Research to interest group influence by Egdell and Thomson (1999), using the attributed influence method, conducted a survey among twenty interest groups about their own influence on the process of agricultural policy, which led to conclusions on the extent of their influence. Different research, by Dür and De Bièvre (2007), conducted a survey among numerous NGOs and business and agricultural constituencies about their influence, where the central question was focused on the extent to which they thought their activities affected policy. Both studies by Egdell and Thomson (1999) and Dür and De Bièvre (2007) used a questionnaire to gather the data. They gathered information on which actors thought of themselves as influential and to what extent they thought of themselves as influential and based their conclusions on that. So the input for this method is a collection of data from actors, using the opinions, experiences, and knowledge of actors. Though this method is relatively simple to use, it leads to problems with the self-estimation of professionals. There may also be strategic reasons to misrepresenting one's own influence or the influence of other actors (Dür, 2008b). Asking independent expert observers may also have drawbacks, since they may unconsciously have their opinions shaped.

In the paragraph on process-tracing, it was mentioned that attributed influence and preference attainment do not measure the actual effectiveness. To elaborate on that statement, the attributed influence method does not actually measure the actual influence but rather the *perceived* influence (Dür, 2008b; Pritoni, 2015). It measures the extent to which actors perceive themselves and other actors as influential. This method is relatively simple to apply, making it applicable to many cases and being able to use it in large N-studies. Therefore studies using the attributed influence method could generalize their results. Although there is a cost to its simplicity. The method lacks thoroughness. The method does not focus on specifying how the influence is exerted, thus making it unable to assess *why* one actor is more influential than the other. A drawback of the method is that, like process-tracing, it is limited to measuring the visibly exerted influence by actors. The influence that is not perceived by the actors but did have an effect on the decision-making process cannot be taken into account by using this method. Dür (2008b) names "lack of information" and "analytic capacity" as possible problems for actors to accurately reflect their own and their peers' influence. The self-estimation of actors likely gives, more than in other methods, answers that are misrepresented. Therefore, not only does the method fail to take invisibly exerted influence into account, the influence that is taken into account could be unreliable.

2.3.4 Assessing the degree of preference attainment

The third and the most prominent method in the existing literature is the preference attainment method. The preference attainment method has been used and further researched by scholars over the years (Bunea, 2013; Bernhagen et al., 2014; Sebök, 2016; Horváthová & Dobbins, 2019; Romeijn, 2021). The added variations on this method (see e.g. Verschuren & Arts, 2004) provide for a relatively broad basis of literature for this particular method. The method uses a comparison of points on a scale. This method compares the ideal point of an actor with the initial point of the decision-maker, and the ideal point of the actor with the outcome (Dür, 2008b). So to use the method, the preference, initial point, and outcome require to be quantified. The distance between

the points is the degree of *lobbying success*, which could be explained as the extent to which the interest group attains its public affairs objective (Mahoney, 2007; Junk, 2019). In contrast to the concept of influence, the term lobbying success does not assume causality and does not require specific actions to be taken place (Dür et al., 2015; Binderkrantz & Rasmussen, 2015). Thus, this term allows for lobbying through various channels to be taken into account as lobbying success, without actually observing influence to have taken place.

An important advantage of the preference attainment method is that it observes the effects of public affairs activities (Seböck, 2016). This means that the results of public affairs activities are taken into account, regardless of the channel that is used to achieve those results. It is an advantage because the use of backdoor lobbying does not always have empirical evidence and therefore the use of it cannot always be taken into account when for example tracing back the process. Next to that, simply being present as an interest group could also affect the outcome of decision-makers. This has an effect on lobbying success, but its effect is not observable and therefore overlooked when using other methods. Another advantage of this method is that it is not very time-consuming and can therefore be used on a large number of cases within single research. So when applied to large N-samples the results could allow to be generalized and could give a representative indication of the lobbying success of actors (Dür, 2008a; Sebök, 2016).

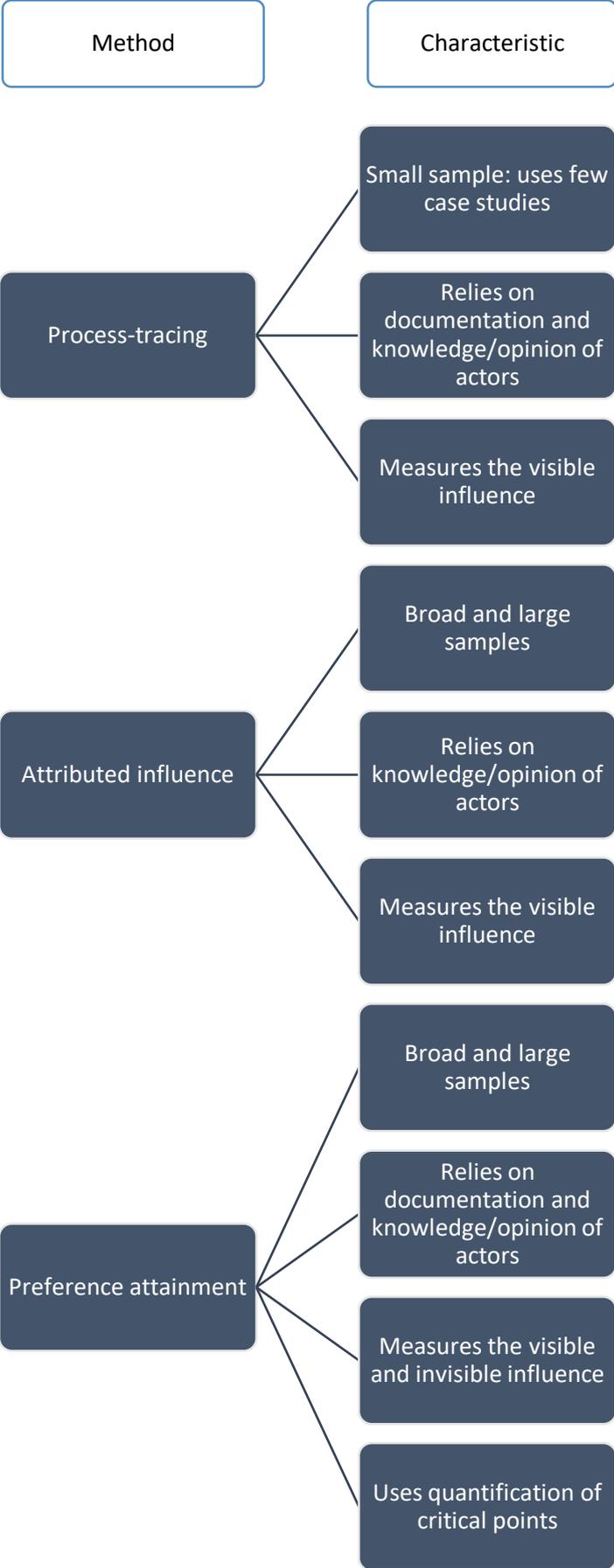
An important drawback to the method is that causality cannot be fully established. The method measures the success of public affairs and focuses on the results, making it unclear how exactly the influence was exerted as the process is not taken into account. Additionally, this method cannot control for alternative factors to the outcome (Dür, 2008b). That means that when an organization would aim to influence a decision-maker, they could seem very successful even when the decision-maker would feel pressured by other societal actors. In contrast, the public affairs activities could seem to work counterproductive while in reality the decision-maker is persuaded by the opinions of the general public.

The data that serves as input for this method can be gathered from documents used in the process, such as policy papers, white papers, strategy documents as well as input from actors. The preferences of actors are often embedded in a strategy. However, preferences can present themselves in various forms. Usually, the preference aligns with the goal that the organization has set for the issue. This means that, like goals, preferences may not always be clear enough to use in evaluations. Goals can be formulated as open-ended. For example, when an organization aims to reach as much funding as possible. Open-ended preferences have no clear place on the scale, making the method hard to apply in such cases. Preferences or goals could be missing, incorrect, or vaguely formulated (Swanborn, 2007). Preferences could also be strategically hidden from research by an organization (De Bruycker, 2019). Finally, goals and preferences can change over time, for example when during the process the actor sees that the goals cannot be reached and therefore makes adjustments. This method, while less than the attributed influence method, relies on the reliability of actors who can misrepresent aspects of the lobbying process for various reasons. This could be the case if an actor does not remember or is not aware of all the actors involved in each issue (Dür, 2008b; De Bruycker, 2019).

Other problems with this method relate to the quantifiability of the lobbying success. The extent of the lobbying success is hard to measure when there is success on one aspect of the policy, but the lobbying failed on all other aspects. Then the lobby may have failed according to the evaluation, yet actors could be very satisfied with the result because they value the aspects that they put more effort in and that resulted in a success, more than the other aspects. So, the salience of each issue to the actor is relevant to the measure of success. Added weights to issues that organizations value

more could overcome one of the drawbacks (Dür, 2008b; Cross, 2012). Examples of studies have shown that some of the aforementioned drawbacks can be overcome. A study into influence during government formation of 2017 in the Netherlands by Romeijn (2021) is one of those studies. To not rely on the memory of policy experts, the study used documented policy requests to find the preferences of actors.

Figure 2: The characteristics of public affairs measurement methods



3. Methodology

In this chapter, the methodology of this research is explained. The chapter starts with the research design, which connects the main research question and sub-questions to the methods that are used to address the questions. Subsequently, the data collection methods and the sample group are further described. Then the ethical side of the research is addressed. Finally, it is explained what topics are used to address the characteristics of the methods.

The question central to this research is *“To what extent are the process-tracing, attributed influence, and preference attainment methods applicable to measure the effectiveness within the context of Dutch regional governments?”*. The choice to focus on regional governments in the Netherlands is made for two practical reasons. The first reason is that the home university is based in The Netherlands. This makes it easier and logical to use the Netherlands as a case study. The second reason is that the interviewer is Dutch of origin. Holding interviews in Dutch with Dutch interviewees overcomes language barriers and allows for easier conversations about the topic.

The case study on regional governments in the Netherlands can be considered descriptive. A descriptive case study describes the connection between a subject and theory. The research is descriptive because it uses theory on the practice of public affairs and compares it to the case of regional governments in the Netherlands. So the connection between the case study and the theory, and its similarities and differences are described, making it a descriptive case study.

As explained in the introduction chapter, the research uses the input characteristics of the methods and compares these characteristics to the practice of public affairs of Dutch regional governments to determine the applicability of the methods. Firstly, the theoretical public affairs process is described. Subsequently, the three methods are analysed and the characteristics that are conditional for applying these methods are outlined. These characteristics are then held against the Dutch practice of public affairs. The Dutch practice of public affairs is investigated to measure if the conditions for applying the three methods are present. Next to that, it is examined to what extent each of the three methods is fit for this specific context.

Considering the methods are not widely applied in the literature and that evaluation techniques in practice are not often used, it is presumed that respondents are not familiar with the methods yet. Therefore, the choice is made to focus on topics that respondents can address, which are topics within the process of public affairs as practiced by the public affairs professionals. These topics are the input characteristics of the three methods. The data that is needed to address the characteristics of the methods is data related to the input source, sample size, transparency of the process, and the quantifiability of certain points within the process. A mixed-method design is used to collect the necessary data, combining desk research and interviews, to address the main research question.

3.1 Data collection methods

3.1.1 Desk research using academic literature

For addressing the first sub-question, which is formulated as *“What public affairs characteristics are conditional to applying the process-tracing, attributed influence, and preference attainment methods to a national context?”*, desk research is performed using academic literature. The desk research resulted in a literature review on the characteristics of three methods for assessing the effectiveness of public affairs. The characteristics of the three methods are described in the previous chapter. The desk research was executed using scientific articles that match the set of selection criteria brought out in Table 1 below.

The article can be considered reliable when it is a peer-reviewed journal article. Articles that do not fulfil the requirements for a scientific article can be considered unfit to describe the methods. The content of the article requires to use or describe at least one of the three methods that are central in this research: process-tracing, attributed influence, or preference attainment. Other articles that could describe public affairs activities but do not address the effectiveness or do not address the methodology can be considered out of the scope of this desk research. Finally, the language needs to be understood by the researcher. Articles in other languages would require automatic translation which could lead to interpretation mistakes. The selection criteria are summarized in the following table:

Table 1: Selection criteria for academic literature

	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
1.	Peer-reviewed journal articles of academic journals	Other types of articles
2.	Articles addressing process-tracing <i>or</i> attributed influence, <i>or</i> preference attainment, in the field of public affairs	Articles that do not address the methodology for assessing the effectiveness of public affairs
3.	Articles are written in Dutch or English	Articles are written in other languages

3.1.2 Desk research using lobby documents

To address the second sub-question, described as “*What characterizes public affairs processes of Dutch regional governments?*”, primary and secondary data is used. The primary data, acquired by interviews, is used to gain insight into the daily practice of public affairs. The secondary data consists of lobby documents of regional governments. The term lobby documents refers to policy and strategy papers of these regional governments that are listed in Appendix A. The desk research resulted in descriptions of the practice of public affairs by Dutch regional governments. To present these descriptions, the model of the public affairs process as presented in the theoretical chapter is used.

Desk research is used in addition to interviews to gain more background information on the topics discussed in the interviews. Desk research is a method that generally saves time compared to other research methods (Baarda, et al., 2013). Desk research is considered time-saving as it is not dependent on respondents and does not require an extensive, long period of data collection, such as observing a certain phenomenon during a set time. A limitation to desk research is that it cannot generate new data.

The selection criteria for lobby documents are aimed at the publishing organization, type of paper, and the content of the paper. The publishing organization needs to be governmental, as the papers are to describe the public affairs activities of regional governments. The publishing organization could also be a municipality, being one of the most important stakeholders to regional governments. The type of paper should be a strategy document, a policy paper, a white paper, a news article, as those could either describe or, in the case of a news article, demonstrate public affairs. A scientific article is aimed too much at the theoretical description of the Dutch system, while the data collection is aimed at a practical point of view of Dutch public affairs as practiced by regional governments. The third criterium is about the content of the paper. This needs to address “lobby”, “public affairs”, “belangen(-behartiging)” or “profilering”.

The policy and strategy papers are selected using the selection criteria in table 1. The selected papers using these criteria have been listed in Appendix C.

Table 2: Selection criteria for policy and strategy papers of regional governments

	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
1.	Papers about regional governments	Papers about other organizations
2.	Lobby documents: strategy document, a policy paper, a white paper or news article	Scientific articles
3.	The article needs to address “lobby”, “public affairs”, “belangen(-behartiging)”, “vertegenwoordiging” or “profilering”	Articles not addressing public affairs

The coding tool Atlas.ti is used for coding the policy documents. The lobby documents are used and the researcher used content analysis to extract the key sentences to this research. Keywords relating to public affairs such as PA, lobby, ‘belangenbehartiging’, ‘vertegenwoordiging’ and ‘profilering’. PA is the abbreviation for public affairs. The word lobby is used synonymously for public affairs. The keyword ‘belangenbehartiging’ refers to the fulfilling of interests, while ‘vertegenwoordiging’ and ‘profilering’ refer to representation. Based on the theoretical chapter, it can be stated that these practices are part of the definition of public affairs. The results of the data collection for this desk research are presented in chapter 4.

3.1.3 Interviews and sample

The second sub-question requires desk research on policy and strategy papers, as they will be used to partly describe the practice of public affairs in the Dutch political system. However, written policy and the actual practice do not always align. Therefore, the second sub-question requires new data on the practice of public affairs in the Dutch political system. Interviews can be seen as the best tool to explore a research subject and help explain the phenomenon by collecting knowledge, experiences, and opinions (Baarda, et al., 2013). Interviews provide the research with new data on what characterizes the practice of public affairs in the Dutch political system and are also used to address the applicability of methods for assessing the effectiveness. The interviews are conducted with public affairs professionals. In contrast to a public affairs practitioner, which can be described as a person that is temporarily trusted with public affairs activities (like mayors or aldermen), the public affairs professional practices public affairs as their profession (Figuee, Gosselt, Linders, & De Jong, 2018).

The interview questions are aimed at four topics: the policy process, documentation of the policy process, the influence of other actors, and quantification of specific points of the process. The general questions on the policy process serve as a natural conversation starter to the interview. Next to that, they aim to shape an image on the stages of public affairs as practiced by Dutch regional governments. The questions on the policy process, together with the questions on the documentation of the policy process, additionally aim to address the applicability of the process-tracing method. The influence of other actors as a topic mainly aims to address the applicability of the attributed influence method, since the attributed influence method heavily relies on actors’ knowledge and judgement about their peers’ actions. The ability to quantify the starting point, outcome, and goal of the policy process mainly address the applicability of the preference attainment method.

The interviewer asked the questions from Appendix B. To gain enough information and not limit the interviewees in their answers, the interviews are semi-structured. The interviews being semi-structured means that there is some structuring using the literature, but the interviews have a relatively free format. Asking follow-up questions takes more time from the interview, but it has multiple benefits. First and foremost, it is beneficial for the research to gather more relevant data.

Secondly, it shows the interviewee that there is real interest in the topic. Finally, a more fluent conversation about a topic makes people more comfortable in answering questions. When the interview heads off-topic, the prepared interview questions will continue. The interviews are held with a semi-formal character and individually between the researcher and the interviewee, in the Dutch language. Conducting the interviews in Dutch aims to overcome any language barriers that could arise and allowed the interviewees to address the questions more easily. Furthermore, the interviews have been conducted through an online video connection. The interview plan can be found in Appendix B. The length of the interviews is between 30 and 45 minutes.

The population of the research is Dutch regional governments. Common titles for these professionals are advocacy officer, liaison officer, or public relations manager. No prescribed number of interviews need to be held for a good sample. The size of the sample is dependent on when saturation is achieved (Baarda, et al., 2013). Saturation means that adding new participants does not lead to different results. After eight respondents, the first conclusions were carefully drawn from the interviews. Then three more interviews have been conducted and compared to the existing data. This showed many similarities. Therefore, it is established after eleven interviews that saturation had been achieved.

The selection criteria for interviewees are aimed at respondents that have good knowledge about the evaluation of public affairs at their organization. Usually, the people working with public affairs daily can be assumed to be involved in the evaluations on their work as well, if any evaluations take place. The research questions also require respondents to have good knowledge about the field, as they need to be able to tell about the regional governments’ public affairs activities in the policy processes, issues, and their own experience with judging the effectiveness of their activities. So the interviews are conducted among people at regional governments that are daily involved in public affairs. These people could be working with public affairs in their daily practice or as managers of these professionals. In addition, the regional governments have also been selected based on their location and public affairs “strength”. Some of the selected regional governments are considered “strong” in public affairs, other regional governments are considered to be weaker in public affairs. The sample should be representative of the Netherlands. To ensure a representative sample of the population, regional governments from various parts of the country have been approached to cooperate.

Table 3: Selection criteria for interviewees

	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
1.	Professionals working with public affairs on a daily basis.	Professionals that do not work on a daily basis with public affairs.
2.	Professionals working at regional governments or partnership organizations.	Professionals not working at regional governments or partnership organizations.
3.	Professionals with a minimum of 6 months experience in the field.	Professionals that do not have sufficient experience in the field.
4.	Regional governments from rural and urban areas.	Regional governments from only one type of area.

The interviewees are public affairs professionals from organizations in the east, west, and south of the Netherlands. There is a balanced division of respondents from regional governments in urban areas and respondents from rural areas with a greater physical distance to the political centre of the Netherlands, The Hague. Most of the respondents are formally employed at municipalities but work at small organizations founded by cooperating municipalities to serve the region. These organizations

work under the heading of regional government. Two of the respondents are public affairs professionals at municipalities, but in close cooperation with municipalities in their respective regions. Finally, one of the respondents works for a foundation that aims to strengthen the region. This respondent is therefore not a civil servant. All of the respondents had a minimum of 6 months of experience in the field of public affairs, but not all of them worked during that time at their current organization. One respondent occupied a public affairs-related position at a different organization before moving to the regional government.

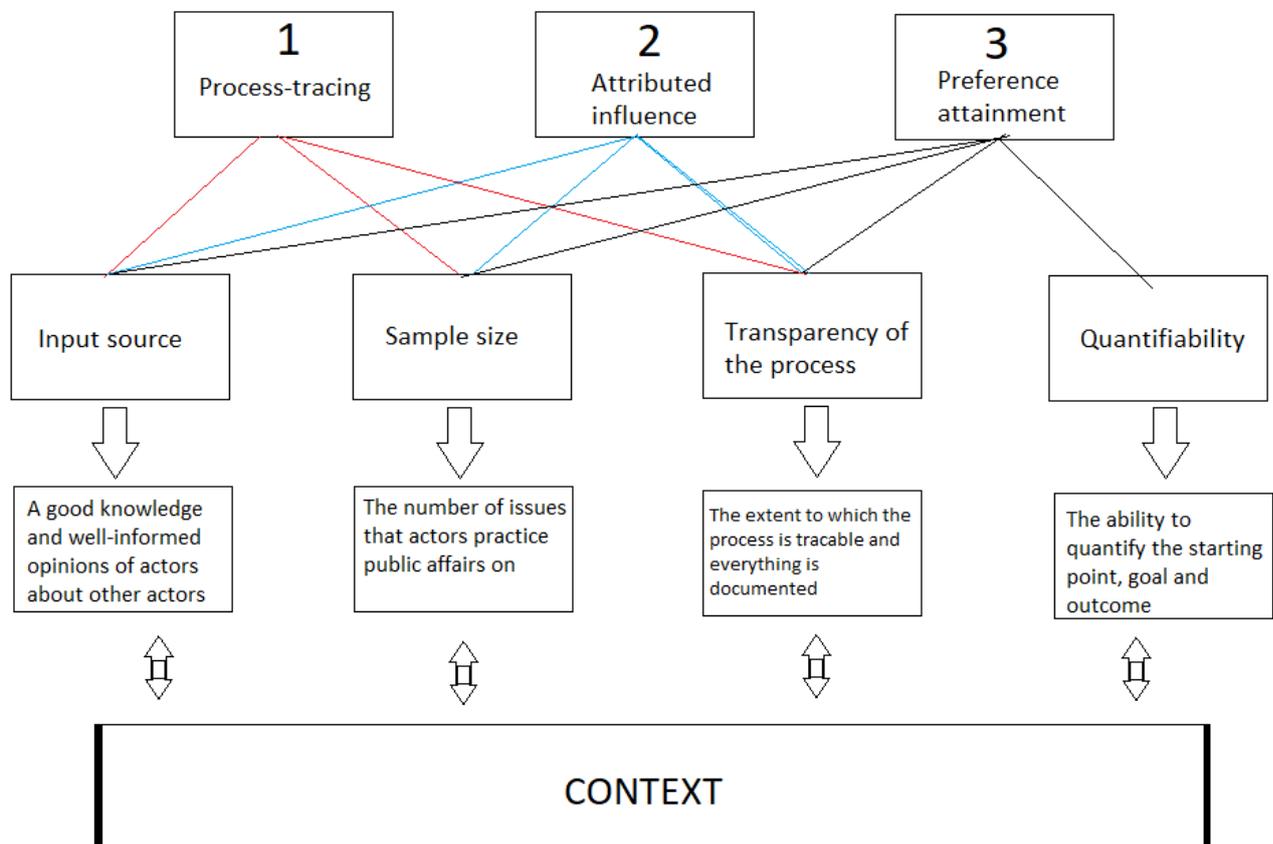
For the coding and transcriptions of the interviews, the tool Atlas.ti is used. Atlas.ti offers a tool to help write transcripts of the recordings of interviews, which is used to save time in writing out the transcripts. The coding used the method of thematic analysis, referring to the identifying and analysing patterns of themes within the transcripts. Copied files of the transcripts and the coding work are be stored in the cloud service of Google Drive, to ensure safe back-ups.

3.1.4 Characteristics of methods that measure the effectiveness of public affairs

The methods and their characteristics have been discussed in the previous chapter. In summary, the process-tracing method can be characterized by a few main aspects. The first characteristic is that it measures the visibly exerted influence. The influence that is exerted through so-called backdoor politics cannot be accounted for when using this method. Furthermore, as input, the method generally uses a small number of case studies and relies on documentation of public affairs processes as well as opinions and knowledge of actors. The attributed-influence method also measures the visibly exerted influence, but generally uses large samples and relies less on documentation but more so on the knowledge and opinions of actors. The preference attainment method also uses large samples, with documentation and knowledge and opinions of actors as input to measure the lobbying success. In addition, the input for this method is very specific as it requires clear points in the public affairs process that can be put on a scale, which are the starting point, preference point, and point of outcome.

In conclusion, each of the methods requires a good knowledge of actors about other actors as input for using the method. This is in figure 3 labelled as input source, since this characteristics is relevant to each of the methods. The sample size is relevant to each of the methods as well since process-tracing can only be applied to small sample sizes and attributed influence and preference attainment can be applied to larger samples. The transparency is relevant to each of the methods as well. Finally, the ability to quantify certain points of the process is only relevant to the preference attainment method. Figure 3 shows how these characteristics are “measured”. Subsequently, it is compared to the context which is in this case the context of Dutch regional governments.

Figure 3: The characteristics of public affairs measurement methods and how to measure them



3.1.5 Limitations to the research design

The methodology of this research has some limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, there could be a bias to the collected data. The researcher prioritized papers and left out smaller, less significant papers in the analysis. Secondly, the papers may not reflect the day-to-day reality of public affairs. A public affairs strategy may not be carried out fully and therefore the data relies partly on the written intentions of organizations. Interviews give additional reliability to these written strategies, but interviews have not been held with all regional governments due to time constraints. Another limitation is the limited possibility to generalize the results. The results apply to the investigated sample, but some organizations in the population could be significantly different in their public affairs activities from the sample, causing the results to be inapplicable.

Finally, the research is executed at the time of a pandemic. The coronavirus limits the research in the way that interviewing in person has been impossible. Online interviews are held as a result. Online interviewing allows the researcher to talk to the respondents and see their expressions but has its drawbacks. In this research, a common drawback has been a suboptimal video connection. This caused disruptions during the interviews and therefore some answers could not be fully understood or captured on video. Also, people could feel less at ease during video interviewing and the body language of the respondent is hard to read as the screen only shows the face. Despite the possible threats and limits, the chosen research design and research methods are considered the most appropriate.

3.2 Ethical data management

This paragraph addresses the ethical side of this research. It explains how the data is handled safely and how it is assured that this research follows the guidelines of ethical data management. Since the interviews are held among people, a request to the BMS Ethics Committee was sent before conducting this research. This request is necessary to ensure that the research will be conducted ethically and personal information is being used safely and securely. The BMS Ethics Committee approved the methodology for this research.

If the thesis is shared with interviewees or other people, the names and any other personally identifiable details will be anonymized to safeguard the privacy of everyone involved. Personal information will only be shared within the University of Twente. This will be made clear to all participants before the interviews. During the interview, the participant is allowed to quit or ignore a question if he or she feels uncomfortable. Before an interview, participants will be asked if they agree with the interviewer recording the interview. After the interview, the written transcript is sent to the participant and the participant has been asked if he/she agrees with it and if the transcript could be used for research purposes. The participant had the option to add, modify or remove certain statements.

At the start of each interview, the interviewee has been shortly explained how the data will be used and how it is stored. Interviewees have been asked beforehand to agree to these terms. The methods are compliant with the GDPR. This means that the participants in the research are aware of how much of their data is stored and how it is stored. Personal data is handled carefully and confidentially. Any sensitive information about the organization that the participant represents, is classified as confidential. This information is only used for this research and will stay within the universities digital environment and the aforementioned backup until it is no longer needed. If the report is shared outside the university, then only the general results will be shared. The interviews with their confidential information will not be shared. This service complies with the UT data storage policy.

4. Results

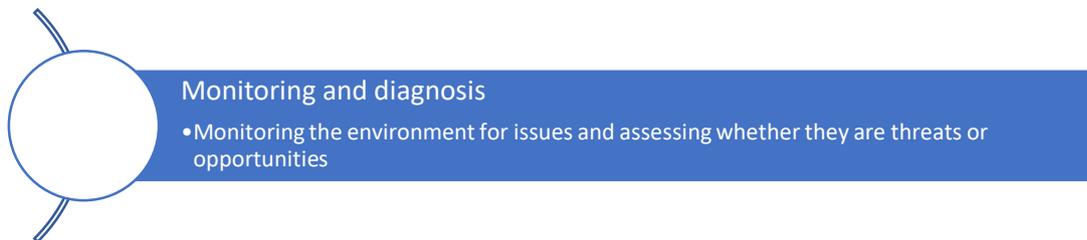
In this chapter the practice of regional governments is explained, using the five stages of the public affairs process as described in chapter 2 (see figure 1). The chapter outlines the results of the desk research and interviews. The description of how regional governments practice public affairs is made based on interviews, policy documents, strategy documents, and white papers of regional governments concerning their public affairs activities.

4.1 The public affairs process of regional governments in the Netherlands

4.1.1 Monitoring and diagnosis

The motivations to practice public affairs are similar across regional governments. Based on the desk research, it can be stated that regions choose to practice public affairs to align their regional interests. This could also expand to aligning the public affairs activities that are practiced by its municipalities. Next to that, regional governments practice public affairs to inform the national government about issues that play in their geographical area and their interests. Finally, activities that are not public affairs related, such as spatial planning or healthcare, could be supported by public affairs. From the lobby documents, it becomes clear that public affairs facilitates the other fields of municipalities.

Dutch regional governments monitor the national political arena for issues that are relevant to them. The interviewees generally could not pinpoint an exact number to the issues they practice public affairs on, as they practice public affairs on overarching topics. These topics are not limited to a single issue nor do they have a clear end, but cover multiple issues and require continuous action. The issues within the topics could be recurring or replaced over time when priorities change. The topics that these organizations monitor differ per organization since each regional government has specific issues related to the characteristics of the region, such as the geographical location. However, some topics are similar across the regional governments.



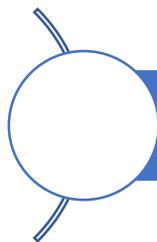
Results show that the topics that are similar across regional governments are mobility, economy/employment, energy, and environment. All regional governments also have an interest in the “Regio Deal”, which is a funding programme by the national government to empower regions. All regions involved in this research have gotten funding by applying for this programme. Based on the interviews, it can be stated that the application for this funding required a great deal of public affairs efforts. Another topic that shows similarity across the regional governments is the topic of mobility. The monitoring and diagnosis stage of public affairs is similar to all regional governments, as each of them monitors the political environment for issues.

4.1.2 Managing the home front

When an issue is considered relevant for a regional government, they set a public affairs goal. To do so, it first needs to align the municipal interests within the region. Based on the interviews, it can be concluded that aligning the municipal interests is advantageous for two reasons. Municipalities could have opposing interests on an issue. These opposing interests could harm regional cooperation, therefore the regional government aims to solve the issue of opposing interests and lobby for a

solution that helps both parties. The other reason for aligning regional interests is that municipalities could be working on issues separately, even though together they could make a stronger “fist” in the political arena.

The data collection results show that the role of regional governments in their respective regions differs. Based on the interviews can be stated that there are three types of regional public affairs organizations. Regional governments can have a solely coordinating role in the region. They coordinate the public affairs activities of the municipalities (and companies in one case) to benefit the region as a whole. The second type of regional government does not rely on the public affairs activities of municipalities but practices public affairs on its own. The public affairs activities are centralized at the regional government. In this case, the regional government receives its goals from joint sessions with the municipalities, from which public affairs is executed by the regional public affairs officer. The last type of regional public affairs is a hybrid between the coordinating organization and practicing organization. These regional governments practice public affairs themselves *and* coordinate public affairs activities by municipalities and other organizations in their region. An example is one of the urban regions which practices public affairs on behalf of its municipalities but also acknowledges that two large cities in its region are strong in public affairs on their own. The regional government attempts to unite them on matters that are relevant to the whole region to be more effective toward the policymaker. Notable is that multiple respondents addressed the difference in interests of the region and cities within the region. A big city does not always have the same interests as the smaller towns or rural areas around the city and the region has the task to represent the common interests.



Managing the home front

- Establishing a goal or preference with all municipalities, reaching consensus

Even though regional governments work together with municipalities to align their interests, the actual public affairs goals and preferences are not always clear. Regional governments generally do not have clear, measurable goals or preferences. One respondent explained that they aim as high as possible to keep their lobby coalition on board. If they would not aim high, the coalition might fall apart and that weakens their position in the political arena. Goals that are not precisely formulated, cannot be used as input for the preference attainment method.

“I don’t care whether it turns out to be 50 million or 70 million, I just want this step to be taken.”

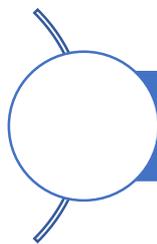
-Anonymous respondent

4.1.3 Planning a strategy

The results of the interviews show that public affairs officers undertake various activities to reach their public affairs goals. Stakeholder analysis and issue management are common activities by public affairs professionals and the actual lobbying is practiced at the end of the process. Most public affairs officers prefer to use mayors and aldermen from their region to do the lobbying, in which the public

affairs officers merely facilitate the meetings with policymakers. There are multiple reasons for this, but the main reason is that their mayors and aldermen have a higher position and thus “carry more weight”. This result is in line with the theory on public affairs.

Besides meeting with policymakers, other notable public affairs activities by regional governments include writing articles for newspapers, forming coalitions with other organizations, or informing the *informateur*² about their region’s point of view on certain topics. A notable strategy in Dutch public affairs is the usage of the government formation process. Since the elections in March 2021, all regional governments aim to influence the formation process and would like any new government to take their interest into account. This is done through inviting members of parliament, sending letters to the *informateur*, and establishing relations with departments. An interesting point by one municipality was that certain public affairs goals are better discussed with civil servants rather than politicians. The reasoning for that is that topics that are discussed with politicians are “instantly made political”, while it could be more effective to achieve a goal by lobbying on a lower level.



Planning a strategy

- Planning on how the organization is going to achieve their goal(s)

Common actors involved in public affairs processes of regional governments are municipalities, the central government, provinces, and private partners. The degree to which municipalities are involved varies. An example here is a rural region having structural meetings with municipal representatives of each of the themes they work on, to discuss their objectives and how to reach them. The public affairs professional of the region knows what to aim for and what resources they can use to achieve that. Based on the policy documents, it becomes clear that the Dutch central government is the main actor on the receiving end of the public affairs activities of regional governments. In a few cases, other governmental institutions are on the receiving end, such as the Dutch provinces or the European Union.

Based on the interviews, it can be stated that actors have good knowledge about the other actors in the arena and what their influence on the decision-making process is. All respondents claim to identify their stakeholders in each public affairs process and to a varying extent also investigate the stakes of other actors. During the interviews, some respondents explained how other regions are doing better in public affairs and why they are better at public affairs. One explanation addressed the party colours of politicians; a region where multiple municipalities have politicians from a governing party in their colleges of mayor and aldermen would be more effective in public affairs than a region that does not have politicians from governing parties in their colleges of mayor and aldermen.

² An *informateur* is someone that is appointed after the election to investigate the possibilities of new government coalitions.

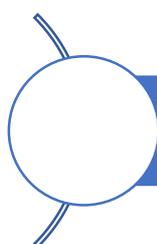
“If you want something, then there are four important factors: you must have a good story, you must have good people behind it, you must tell a good message along with it and you must be able to show it in practice. If you meet those four factors, you will get a long way.”

-Anonymous respondent

4.1.4 Executing strategy

Issue management is the most practiced activity by regional governments, followed by lobbying. Raising awareness for the issues that are present in the region seems to be their main concern, which manifests in the lobbying for mobility projects, for example. The interviews revealed that agenda-setting success is a more common goal of public affairs professionals in this context than influencing the decision-making process. Regional governments that are more experienced in public affairs and have more resources also practice public affairs to affect decision-making. In the cases where the regional government does aim to achieve decision-making success, regional governments present themselves as a partner to the central government in solving national issues.

Public affairs processes are documented in various ways. Some regional governments claim to not hold any documentation on the public affairs process. Other regional governments use a single sheet of paper in which they note down the most important information throughout the process. Next to that, regional governments generally have annual planning for the issues at hand. Some regional governments publish white papers and practice public affairs via the media. Most regional governments also have strategy documents about their lobby activities published, although the publishing of position papers or letters to the decision-makers is uncommon. Most activities from the category of direct lobbying, such as meetings with policymakers, are not documented. Direct contact with civil servants or politicians is not laid down in documents, can be concluded from the interviews. This makes the process-tracing method hard to apply since it relies a great deal on the documented communication between the public affairs practicing party and the receiving end.



Executing strategy

- Performing lobby activities

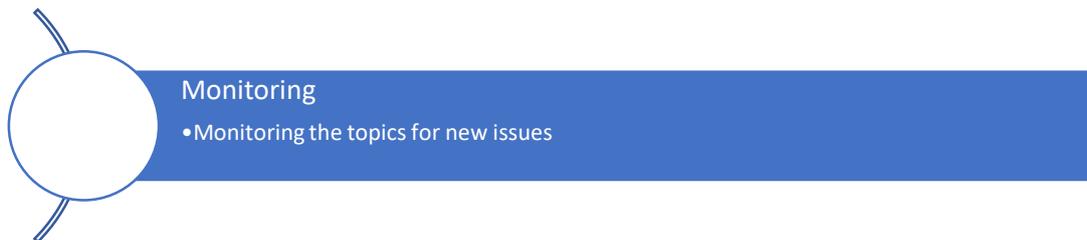
Regional governments have shown to also use indirect lobbying to achieve their objectives. An example of using media to influence public opinion is the letter by Regio Achterhoek (2021). A letter from one of the mayors in a national newspaper is published, in which the mayor calls upon the new cabinet to invest in digital transport. The piece also mentions some companies that are located in the region that would benefit from more government funding on this subject.

Communication consultancy firm Wepublic (2021) found that the most popular tool of regional governments in their public affairs activities is to contact departments, followed by contacting politicians. Direct contact with the decision-making authorities is used among most regional governments. In their public affairs activities, regional governments often make use of aldermen and

mayors within their region to tell the story that they would like to tell (Wepublic, 2021). The openness of regional governments about their activities shows that the attributed influence method could be applied, as the research by WePublic also showed.

4.1.5 Evaluation

Regional governments are divided about evaluating their public affairs processes. Almost half of the respondents explained that evaluation is a standard activity that concludes the public affairs process. For public affairs professionals at regional governments, an evaluation includes discussing their strong and weak points during the process, learning from that to improve future public affairs processes. The other half of the respondents claimed that they generally do not carry out evaluations on their work. None of the regional governments measure their success using the methods described in this thesis.



It can be concluded from the data collection that moments in the process can be pinpointed as being “influential”. There is full agreement from the respondents on that matter. An example given by an interviewee was a conversation about a mobility project, was when the public affairs officer “hijacked” a meeting that was about to be cancelled and sent a new agenda to the participants. This new agenda fit the agenda of the public affairs officer and their region better and later proved to be an important moment in the decision-making process. Some of the respondents also noted that lobbying success cannot be ascribed to a single moment in the policy-making process, but that there is always a combination of factors involved. There are multiple, sometimes many, factors that are involved in the success. This result shows that the main condition to applying the process-tracing method, the ability to pinpoint moments in the process as influential, is met.

While in general most goals can be defined as unclear, this also means that they are hard to measure. Respondents in interviews stated that issues that they work with, when they aim for a new law, put an issue on the public or political agenda, or aim to achieve cooperation with the central government on a new mobility project, could not be expressed in a number or percentage. For only a few issues it would be possible to quantify the starting point, preference, and outcome, mostly issues where the objective is to obtain funding.

The Regio Deal is a topic on which most regional governments decide on a target number. However, based on the interviews it can be stated that this issue can be seen as an exception. The interviews show that Dutch regional governments rarely have a clear, pre-determined goal. Their goals are often missing, unclear, or not measurable. One example from the interviews is a regional government that aims to gather as much funding as possible. They did not register an amount as a minimum, but they had an idea of what they should be able to achieve at the very least. This target amount was not registered and was an objective they had agreed upon within the organization. Other examples of unclear goals are the agenda-setting objectives. An objective could be to raise as much awareness as possible on a topic that is important to the region and therefore the regional government, but there is no limit set to that objective.

The majority of the respondents think that specific public affairs goals and outcomes that can be expressed with a nominal value are fit to be put on a scale. A recurring example in the interviews is the Regio Deal, for which all regions practiced public affairs to receive funding. However, respondents are divided about the ability to quantify public affairs outcomes that cannot be expressed in nominal value. Most respondents think that quantifying their objectives would be a difficult task, with some organizations specifying that they only have absolute goals. An example of an absolute goal is the improvement of a highway. For the regional government, its goal is a dichotomy: whether the highway will be improved by the ministry for infrastructure or not. No degree or number can be applied to that goal. This result shows that the main condition to applying the preference attainment method, namely that the starting point, goal, and outcome could be expressed in numbers, is not quite met. Only specific public affairs processes, when funding is the goal, could be fit for the preference attainment method.

Some respondents noted in the interviews that they do not recommend researching the effectiveness of public affairs. Short-term effectiveness may not be good for the long term, since relationships with policymakers and other stakeholders are important in this field. Public affairs officers could damage its long-term effectiveness if they went for quick wins. Next to that, respondents also noted that the effectiveness of their results would not do justice to their actions. Public affairs officers could improve their relations with policymakers or they could be very happy with the progress made, even if they did not reach the goal that was set at the start.

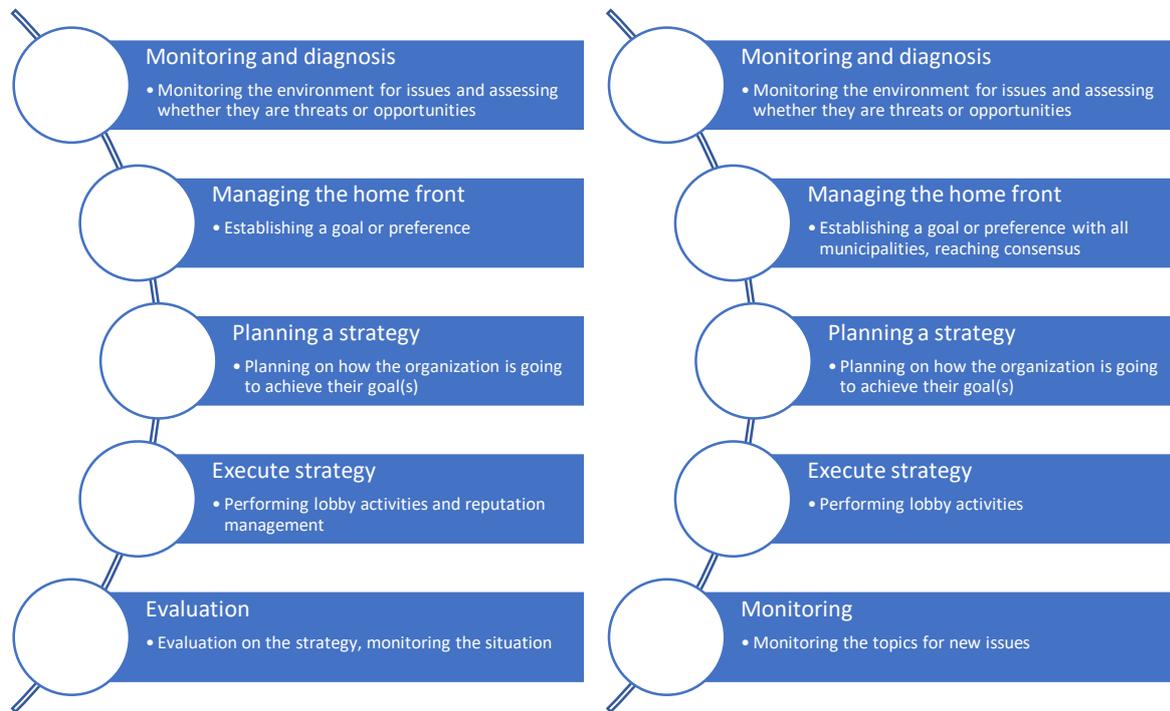
4.1.6 Comparison of public affairs processes

The public affairs process starts with monitoring the environment and assessing whether upcoming issues are threats or opportunities. Subsequently, when the organization decides to act upon an issue, the regional government manages its home front. This is where the theory and the practice are different. While the theory assumes that it is one organization that establishes a goal, in practice, this is sometimes the most challenging part of the public affairs process. Achieving consensus with the municipalities that guide the regional government in its goals is considered to be challenging and time-intensive.

Figure 4: Comparison between public affairs processes

Theoretical public affairs process

Public affairs processes of Dutch regional governments



The strategy planning stage is similar to the theory. Organizations do plan strategies to achieve their public affairs goals. Subsequently, the strategy is executed. The theory describes a role for the practice of reputation management in the execution of the strategy. This is not the case in the practice of regional governments. While this is not a subject that is investigated thoroughly, the reputation of regional governments was not often mentioned by respondents. Finally, the theory describes a stage of evaluation. In practice, evaluations are uncommon. Organizations that do undertake evaluations do so informally and quickly as a wrap-up at the end of the process. Other organizations leave the subject as it is and continue monitoring the topics for any new issues.

Considering the above, it can be stated that the Dutch practice of public affairs shows many similarities with the theory on public affairs processes as described in chapter 2. The methods central in this research, process-tracing, attributed influence, and preference attainment have been applied in the literature. It can be concluded from the comparison between the theory and the practice that the three methods central in this research, process-tracing, attributed influence, and preference attainment, can be applied to the Dutch practice of public affairs. Using the three methods can be considered valid in this context. However, the research aims to find the best applicable method to the Dutch practice of public affairs. Therefore the characteristics of the methods are compared to the Dutch practice of public affairs by regional governments in the next chapter.

5. Discussion

This chapter compares the characteristics of the three methods central in this research to the practice of public affairs by Dutch regional governments. The previous chapter discussed the practice of public affairs by Dutch regional governments. The characteristics of the three methods were discussed in the context of the public affairs process. This chapter further elaborates on the characteristics of the three methods in this specific context and what it means for the applicability of the three methods.

5.1 General findings

5.1.1 Public affairs activities

The theoretical chapter argued that public affairs could be performed behind closed doors, meaning that public affairs activities may not always be transparent and visible to other actors. It was also discussed that the process-tracing and the attributed influence methods require a transparent public affairs process to be applied. Activities of regional governments give an insight into the extent to which they are transparent. From the previous chapter, it can be derived that regional governments perform various public affairs activities. These include, but are not limited to publishing (opinion) articles in newspapers, holding meetings with policymakers, organizing meetings for their politicians to meet with policymakers, forming coalitions with other actors, and sending letters to the informateur.

The results of the interviews align with the results from the lobby documents, in which roughly the same activities were mentioned; meeting with decision-makers, publishing media articles et cetera. Furthermore, the lobby documents show that regional governments are fairly transparent in which public affairs activities they conduct. Therefore, the type of lobby activities is no restriction to the method used for assessing the effectiveness.

5.1.2 Range of cases

The range of cases is required to assess whether preference attainment and attributed influence can be used or process-tracing. Process-tracing cannot be applied to many issues, while attributed influence and preference attainment are more simple in use and therefore can be applied to many issues at once, allowing for more valid and reliable conclusions about the regional governments' public affairs effectiveness. In the previous chapter, it is concluded that regional governments apply public affairs on various topics. On these topics, the amount of issues differs as the actors could not give an exact amount, since it is unclear for them as well. The topics that regional governments address include a varying number of issues, making it difficult to assess whether process-tracing is applicable. The range of cases being unclear has no consequences for the applicability of attributed influence or preference attainment.

5.1.3 Evaluation

From the data collection, it became clear that respondents are not enthusiastic about evaluating their actions for their effectiveness. Researching the effectiveness would give a skewed image of the actual effects of their activities. Timmermans et al. (2019) explain that there are reasons for public affairs professionals to be opposed to evaluation. Measuring the effectiveness could have sensitive results for the public affairs professional, as it essentially reviews the performance of the public affairs professional. When looking into the objections that are raised by public affairs professionals, these objections could be valid reasons to oppose evaluation. The outcomes of public affairs are not always clear and building a good relationship with the policymaker has a value that is not represented in the current methods for evaluating public affairs. That being said, De Bruycker (2019)

explains that measuring one's public affairs impact could add value to their practice. Transparency towards clients, or in this case municipalities, has a positive effect on trust and loyalty.

5.2 Discussion per method

5.2.1 Process-tracing

In the theoretical chapter, it was explained that the process-tracing method investigates the entire process of public affairs. Process-tracing generally uses documents and interviews to thoroughly investigate the process. To determine the effectiveness of the activities, the method examines the moments in the process where public affairs activities have taken place. Subsequently, the method examines if those activities have had an effect. To use the process-tracing method, the process should be explicitly documented so that it can be pinpointed where and how influence has been exerted. Without extensive documentation on public affairs activities, the process cannot be traced and that negatively affects the applicability of process-tracing to assess the effectiveness. So to assess whether this method could be used, it is investigated to what extent moment in the process could be pinpointed as influential and to what extent processes are properly documented.

The data collection results showed that the respondents were divided about the subject of identifying points in the process where influence is exerted. Some respondents argued that a single meeting or news article could be identified as influential in the process. However, it was also argued that a public affairs process is always dependent on multiple moments where influence has been exerted. In the previous paragraph, it was also noted that Dutch regional governments are fairly transparent in their documentation of public affairs processes. Some regional governments published strategies, some go even further than that and show letters that they sent to the *informateur* or published media articles. The extent to which invisible, undocumented channels are used differs.

Considering that moments can be identified in public affairs processes of Dutch regional governments, the process-tracing could be a good method to assess the effectiveness of public affairs. However, the lack of documentation makes the method hard to use as it would rely mostly on interviews. The amount of issues is also unclear for each region since they work on various topics, each having one or more issues. The process-tracing is a thorough method, with the drawback that assessing the effectiveness per issue takes a lot of time. Therefore it is likely that not every issue of the regional government can be included in the research, negatively affecting the validity of the results.

The literature names a number of drawbacks to the process-tracing method. The first one is the problem of assessing causality, which the process-tracing method aims to achieve. The results of this research do not provide a method that could overcome that obstacle. The public affairs process not being fully documented complicates the problem of assessing causality. The other drawbacks that are named in the literature, being the lack of a yardstick for the meaning of 'being influential' and that the method can only measure the visibly exerted influence can also not be overcome in this context.

5.2.2 Attributed influence

The attributed influence method requires actors to estimate the influence their peers have over the decision-maker(s). Each actor estimating the extent to which their peers have been influential would result in an overview of actors that have been perceived to be influential and actors that have not been perceived to be influential. If actors in the political arena do not have sufficient knowledge of their peers or if they are unsure about whether they could name them all, then this method could be

unfit to use. Besides naming the actors, it is also important for applying this method that the actors know what other stakeholders in the arena want and how they practice their public affairs.

One of the drawbacks to the method of attributed influence is the unreliability of self-estimation, which can be countered by having stakeholders estimate the influence of their peers instead of their own. The other drawback that was noted in the theoretical chapter is the problem that peers can only assess the influence of each other when the influence is visibly exerted by using indirect lobbying. Literature states that the attributed influence method could be inapplicable because actors lack sufficient information on the actions of their peers (Stevens & De Bruycker, 2020). From the interviews and lobby documents, it can be derived that actors estimate themselves to have good knowledge about the public affairs activities of their peers. Several respondents named other regional governments that they thought of as influential in the Dutch national political arena. Sometimes they work together on goals, while other times they compete with each other for the same resources. Either way, the actors interact with each other during a public affairs process and observe their actions. So it can be concluded that actors have good knowledge about the public affairs activities of other actors.

5.2.3 Preference attainment

The preference attainment method has been explained in the theoretical chapter as a method that compares points of the public affairs process. Central in this method is the ability to note down the issue in a set of numbers on a scale. Subsequently, a formula is used to compare the points, resulting in the lobbying success of an organization on an issue. The initial situation, the preference of the actor, and the outcome require to be quantified. So in this research, it has been investigated to what extent starting points, preferences, and outcomes of public affairs processes are clearly expressed and measurable since the method requires both the preference and outcome to be put on a scale.

Interviews revealed that the goals of Dutch regional governments are often missing or unclear. Only in cases when funding is involved, there would be a clear, pre-determined goal. In other cases, the goal could be present but not specific. This is the case when a goal states to aim the highest achievable, without adding a specific number or percentage to the goal. The results have also shown that goals can be aimed at the means (“organize an event”) instead of the objective, causing the actual goal that the organization aims to achieve to be unclear. Therefore, it can be stated that in the Dutch context, public affairs professionals rarely have a clear, specific preference that can be noted down on a scale.

In the previous chapter, it was observed that outcomes are clear to the respondents. Examples of an altered policy or the Regio Deal were given, in which regions got funding for regional projects. However, it was also observed that these outcomes are rarely fit for quantification. The outcomes of public affairs present themselves in different ways. Public affairs outcomes can be a new law or an altered policy. A new law is an outcome that respondents considered being unfit for quantification as it could either be passed or not. There is no middle ground or a certain degree to which the law could be passed. Therefore quantification of the outcome is impossible. New policy is also considered by respondents to be unfit for quantification as it is complex and there are many aspects to a new policy that could either be in favour of the regional organization or not. There is one topic that is suitable for applying the preference attainment method, which almost all respondents agreed upon. The example of the Regio Deal is often mentioned as an outcome that could be put on a scale and quantified.

Similar to the public affairs outcomes, it is derived from interviews and policy documents that most topics also do not have a clear starting point for the public affairs professionals. It can be stated that

the outcomes and starting points of public affairs processes by Dutch regional governments are too ambiguous and unclear to be expressed in numbers or percentages. Based on this result, the preference attainment method could be considered unfit for the context of Dutch regional governments. The preference attainment method requires complex issues to be simplified to numbers, which is confirmed by Dür (2008b) and Klüver (2011) in different contexts. Some techniques overcome this obstacle. Klüver (2009) proposes using quantitative content analysis, such as WORDSCORES or Wordfish, to assess the policy positions of actors. Applying these automated techniques to policy documents of actors could assess the policy position of an actor compared to a neutral position. Computational text analysis methods are broadly applied in the field of political science since their introduction by Laver, Benoit, and Garry (2003), yet the validity is questioned (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013; Welbers, Van Atteveldt, & Benoit, 2017; Bruinsma & Gemenis, 2019). The data collection of this research showed that there are documents of regional governments available in which their preferences are presented. However, quantitative content analyses require a large number of documents to assess the policy position (Thomann & Sager, 2017) and are unreliable using small text documents (Klemmensen, Hobolt, & Hansen, 2007). Considering this research found that Dutch regional governments do not extensively document all their preferences and goals, quantitative content analyses should be used with caution in this context.

Respondents think that the preference attainment method does not capture the activities and outcomes well. Some activities do not have the goal of influencing a policymaker in the short-term but attempt to establish a long-term relationship with the policymaker. The literature does not present a fulfilling solution to overcome the strategic “failure” of short-term goals in favour of long-term goals. A study on the effectiveness of public affairs in Czechia and Hungary concluded that the preference attainment method is an issue-specific method (Horváthová & Dobbins, 2019). The same conclusion can be drawn for this context. For regional governments the preference attainment method could be applied to specific issues, but not for entire organizations.

5.2.4 Addressing the main research question

In the discussion, the following characteristics of the methods have been compared to the Dutch practice of public affairs: the sample size, the extent to which actors have knowledge about each other’s actions, the extent to which processes are documented and can be traced and the ability to quantify certain points of the process. It is observed that Dutch public affairs processes use varying numbers of cases, so a method that is only applicable to small sample sizes could be considered unfit. Actors have a good knowledge of each other’s actions and processes are fairly well documented, allowing for some methods to be applied with obstacles. The extent to which points in the process can be quantified is also measured. Processes are often not eligible for quantification, since many public affairs goals of regional governments are not expressed cannot numbers or percentages. The starting points and outcomes of public affairs processes are similarly unfit for quantification.

Based on the results of the data collection, it can be stated that the attributed influence method would be the most viable option to assess the perceived influence of public affairs in the context of Dutch regional governments. The method is not restricted by requirements to the number of issues or the type of issues, which are obstacles to using process-tracing and preference attainment. Considering that there is no obstacle to applying the attributed influence method, it is fit for the context of Dutch regional governments.

5.2.5 Meaning of the results for the field of public affairs

There is a consensus in the literature that understanding how influence can be measured is important for understanding democracy and decision-making processes (Schiffers, 2016). This

research provides a step toward understanding the relationship between decentral governments and central governments. The influence that decentral governments have over decision-making processes is an aspect of that relationship that should be further investigated. This research shows that the contemporary methods for assessing the effectiveness of public affairs can be applied to a context of public actors, although the degree of applicability varies. This result takes away methodological barriers for using the methods in similar national contexts.

The research results provide some implications for the field of public affairs that should be considered. The preference attainment method is the most prominent in the literature for assessing the effectiveness of public affairs (Dür, 2008b), and the process-tracing method is a common method for assessing causality in social sciences (Verschuren & Arts, 2004). The results of this research show that researchers should consider using the attributed influence for research contexts that involve public actors as public affairs practicing organizations.

6. Conclusion

The central problem in this research is finding a method for measuring the Dutch regional practice of public affairs. To research the problem, desk research and interviews have been conducted.

6.1 Addressing the research questions

6.1.1 Addressing the first sub-question

The first sub-question is formulated as: *“What public affairs characteristics are conditional to applying the process-tracing, attributed influence, and preference attainment methods to a national context?”*. To address the first sub-question, all characteristics that are relevant for each of the three methods to assess the effectiveness of public affairs have been studied.

The process-tracing method can be described as a thorough method for assessing the effectiveness of public affairs. The method uses a few case studies to reach conclusions on the effectiveness. It relies on the documentation of the process and the knowledge of relevant actors as input. The output is an assessment of the visibly exerted influence.

The attributed influence method can be described as a method that is less thorough than process-tracing but can be applied to a large number of cases. It also relies on the knowledge and experiences of relevant actors but does not use documentation of the process. The output is also an assessment of the visibly exerted influence, but it should be noted that the output is subjective. It measures the influence as it is perceived by relevant actors.

The preference attainment method is also applicable to a large number of cases, at the cost of thoroughness. The method generally uses documentation of the process and the knowledge of actors as input. Crucial to applying this method is the ability to quantify the preference or goal of the public affairs practicing organization, the outcome of the public affairs process, and the initial point of the decision-maker in the process. When the method is applied, researchers do not draw conclusions on the actual influence that an organization had over the outcome. Instead, researchers could draw conclusions on how successful their lobby was. So the output is the lobbying success.

6.1.2 Addressing the second sub-question

The second sub-question that has been addressed in this research is formulated as: *“What characterizes public affairs processes of Dutch regional governments?”*. From this research, it can be concluded that Dutch regional governments have a lot of focus on issue management. Agenda-setting is a common practice among public affairs professionals at these organizations. The type of issues that these organizations deal with vary, but each regional government practices or has practiced public affairs on mobility projects and the Regio Deal. To reach their goals, they plan meetings with the policymakers, form coalitions with like-minded actors, and address the issue in the media. Interviewees mentioned that they generally try to cooperate with other actors, even if they both aim for the same goal. ‘Attacking’ an actor that aims for the same funding or project is uncommon in this arena.

The policymakers in the Dutch arena are most often the central government (*‘het Rijk’*) or the provinces. In some cases, the regional government is working on the European level. It is notable that in this arena the type of issues can be comparable to a contest. Taking the Regio Deal, for example, regional governments need to present their region and its unique qualities to compete for funding. The same concept upholds for large mobility projects, for which the *BO MIRT* assigns the projects that get funding.

6.1.3 Addressing the main research question

This research has investigated to what extent the characteristics that the process-tracing, attributed influence, and preference attainments methods use to assess the effectiveness of public affairs are present in the Dutch context. Addressing the main research question, formulated as *“To what extent are the process-tracing, attributed influence and preference attainment methods applicable to measure the effectiveness within the context of Dutch regional governments?”*, has led to conclusions on each of the methods.

In the Dutch system, it can be concluded that process-tracing could be applied, but it is not the best possible method to assess the effectiveness of public affairs as it could only be applied to a few issues. The number of topics and the varying amount of issues within the topics that each organization practices public affairs on, make process-tracing a time-intensive method in the context of Dutch regional governments.

The preference attainment method could be applied to some issues of regional governments. Applying the preference attainment method to the context of Dutch regional governments is difficult since regional governments deal with issues of which most cannot be quantified. On top of that, preferences and outcomes are often unclear or missing. So for the few issues where funding is involved, like the Regio Deal, the method can be applied. For a comprehensive approach, the method relies on quantitative text analysis. This method for extracting policy positions could be used in theory, although caution is advised due to the possible lack of validity and reliability of the method in this context. This research has not investigated if the context of Dutch regional government could be deemed fit for the WORDSCORES or Wordfish methods.

The attributed influence method is relatively simple and can be applied to a large number of issues. The method requires stakeholders to have a good understanding of their peers' actions, which is the case for public affairs professionals of Dutch regional governments. Another argument is that regional governments have an unclear amount of issues, while the attributed influence method is easy to apply on a large number of issues. So the attributed influence method would be a good fit to research the effectiveness of public affairs as practiced by Dutch regional governments.

Finally, some general remarks should be made. First of all, any method for assessing the effectiveness of public affairs could be applied to the Dutch context of regional governments, but it is dependent on the issue. The process of an issue can be a determinant of the method that investigates the effectiveness of public affairs. If the issue can be expressed in numbers, like the Regio Deal funding, then preference attainment could be applied to research the effectiveness. If the issue is well-documented and has clear points in the process where effectiveness is visibly exerted, then process-tracing could be applied. Overall, attributed influence is the method that can be applied regardless of the issue in the context of public actors practicing public affairs.

6.2 Limitations and recommendations for further research

6.2.1 Limitations

Time limitations

The research had been conducted from February 2020 until the end of 2021. This period is characterized by the coronavirus pandemic and frequent lockdowns, i.e. no face-to-face contact with other students, supervisors, and interviewees. This affected the research because face-to-face contact helps people understand each other better. Due to these circumstances, conducting this research has not been easy and the circumstances should be understood as a factor in the long duration of this research.

Limited literature

It is admitted that this research has its methodological constraints. Due to the limited literature on public affairs, there is no research known that assesses the applicability of methods for measuring the effectiveness of public affairs to specific contexts. Therefore, to research the applicability of the aforementioned methods, a method had to be devised for this research specifically. By using the characteristics that process-tracing, attributed influence, and preference attainment require to use, the applicability is tested. This is a limitation because there was no similar research done before. The methodology of comparing the characteristics that methods use to assess effectiveness against characteristics present in a context is unusual in scientific research.

6.2.2 Recommendations for further research

The field would benefit from more large N-studies

This research has addressed methodological issues for measuring interest group influence. Specifically, when researchers would investigate the effectiveness of public affairs by public actors, this research could prove useful in the methodological considerations. It is recommended that this future research would apply the attributed influence on public actors that practice public affairs, using large N-samples. In case researchers would choose a different method for assessing the effectiveness of public affairs, it is recommended to take the methodological drawbacks into account.

Applying the attributed influence method on the Dutch system

In the chapter on the Dutch system, it was explained how communication consultancy firm WePublic recently used the attributed influence method to assess the effectiveness of public affairs by Dutch regional governments. Their research is a good step toward understanding the effectiveness of regional governments on public affairs. The research indicates which regional governments are more effective than others and why they are more effective. However, the research lacks a scientific base, weakening the validity. Next to that, in the opinion of this researcher, it should be considered to apply the method for assessing the effectiveness of public affairs on a specific number of issues for each organization. The research of WePublic aimed at the organization in general; the strategic lobby power, the composition of the region, and evaluation of the lobby. They were more detailed on the Regio Deal, for which they included the lobby result of the Regio Deal and the means used to acquire the Regio Deal. Zooming in on only the Regio Deal does not do right to the effectiveness of the regional government. Including a variety of issues increases the validity of the research.

The effectiveness of public affairs cannot be simplified to its outcome

Multiple interviewees noted that their work is difficult to evaluate. Maintaining good relations is a core activity within public affairs. If public affairs professionals would aim to reach every goal without compromising, then that could negatively affect the relationship with the policymaker. Therefore, public affairs professionals may refrain from pushing their interests to the edge with policymakers for the long-term benefit of maintaining a good relationship. Refraining from pushing their interests could harm the short-term effectiveness of public affairs. Compromising on an issue might objectively mean that the interest has not been fully met and therefore the public affairs activities may not be considered "effective". However, the public affairs professional could achieve a better relationship with the policymaker because he compromised on the issue, for example. Thus, not meeting the interest does not necessarily mean a bad public affairs result. Further research should consider using other aspects of public affairs rather than feasible aspects such as the outcome. The strength of the relationship between interest groups and policymakers is an aspect that should not be ignored in evaluating the effectiveness of public affairs activities.

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Appendix A: List of regional governments

Table 1: Regional governments (data from Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten (VNG, n.d.))

Name of administrative regional government	Drechtsteden
	Metropoolregio Eindhoven
	Metropoolregio Rotterdam Den Haag
	Regio Achterhoek
	Regio Alblasserwaard Vijfheerenlanden
	Regio Alkmaar
	Regio Gooi en Vechtstreek
	Regio Assen-Groningen
	Regio Hart van Brabant
	Regio Holland-Rijnland
	Regio Midden-Holland
	Regio Noord-Veluwe
	Regio Parkstad Limburg
	Regio Rijk van Nijmegen
	Regio Rivierenland
	Regio Stedendriehoek
	Regio Twente
	Regio West-Brabant
	Regio Zwolle
	Stadsregio Amsterdam
Stadsregio Arnhem-Nijmegen	
U10 Regio Utrecht	
WF7 Westfriese gemeenten	

Appendix B: Interview plan (EN + NL)

Aim of the interview

The aim of the interview is to gain information on how public affairs by regional governments is practiced in the Dutch system.

Target groups

Public affairs professionals working at Dutch regional governments.

Policy process

What is your role in the policy-making process?

How does your organization influence the process?

Could you give an estimate on how many issues you practice public affairs on per year?

What are the critical times to influence the policy?

Documentation

In which way do you document the process of policy influencing?

How do you document your real preferences about policies in the strategy papers of your organization?

Influence of other actors

Can you name the other interest groups who influence the policy in parallel to your organization?

Can you describe how they influence the policy?

What is the difference in access to the decision-makers between your organization and other interest groups?

In which way / how the regions are influencing the policy-making?

Quantification

How do you assess the outcome of the policy-making?

Who is involved in your organization in this assessment?

How do you evaluate the starting-point of influencing the policy-making?

Do you use numbers or percentages for this evaluation?

Doel van het interview

Het doel van het interview is om informatie te verkrijgen over hoe public affairs door regionale overheden wordt beoefend in Nederland.

Doelgroepen

Public affairs professionals bij Nederlandse regionale overheden.

Beleidsproces

Wat is jouw rol in het beleidsproces?

Hoe beïnvloed je organisatie het proces?

Kan je een schatting geven van hoeveel issues je public affairs op beoefend elk jaar?

Wat zijn kritieke momenten in het proces waarop je je invloed laat gelden? Zijn die aan te wijzen? K

Documentatie

Op welke manier wordt het proces van beleid beïnvloeding gedocumenteerd?

Hoe leggen jullie je werkelijke voorkeuren vast over beleid in de strategiedocumenten van je organisatie?

Invloed van andere actoren

Kan je andere interest groups op een issue identificeren met andere voorkeuren voor hetzelfde beleid?

Kan je beschrijven hoe zij het beleid beïnvloeden?

Wat is het verschil in toegankelijkheid tot beleidsmakers tussen jouw organisatie en andere organisaties?

Op welke manier beïnvloeden regio's het beleidsproces?

Kwantificering

How evalueer je de uitkomst van het beleidsproces?

Wie is in jouw organisatie betrokken bij deze evaluatie?

Hoe bepaal je het start punt van het beleidsproces?

Kan je cijfers of percentages hieraan koppelen?

Appendix C: Lobby documents

	Regional government	Title of the document
	Regio West-Brabant	Jaarstukken RWB 2018
		Actieprogramma RWB 2019-2023
	Regio Rotterdam-Den Haag	Strategische agenda MRDH 2022
		MRDH Zienswijze Regl. Investeringsprogramma – raadsvoorstel
	Regio Noordoost-Brabant	'Kabinet, ontdek ons geheim!': oproep aan nieuw kabinet
		Samenwerkingsagenda Regio Noordoost Brabant
	Regio Achterhoek	Bundel van Algemeen Bestuur van 21 april 2021
		Programmabegroting en Financiële begroting 2021-2024
	Regio Rivierenland	Lobby agenda Fruitdelta 2019 en verder
		Agendapunt Algemeen Bestuur: Jaarplan 2020 Lobby & Branding FruitDelta Rivierenland
		Regionaal Economisch Ambitiedocument 2022-2025
	Regio Twente	Jaarverslag Lobby Twente 2018
		Jaarverslag Lobby Twente 2019
		Jaarverslag Lobby Twente 2020
	Regio Zwolle	Begroting Regiobudget 2021
	Regio Foodvalley	Regio Foodvalley & Triple Helix: Kadernota 2019-2022
	Regio Arnhem-Nijmegen	Dynamische Jaaragenda 2019-2020

